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ABSTRACT

This information sheet, based on "Flexible Pacing for Able Learners" by Neil Daniel and June Cox, defines flexible pacing as any program in which students are taught material that is appropriately challenging for their ability and allows them to move forward in the curriculum as they master content and skill. The document outlines methods used to achieve flexible pacing, such as grade skipping, early entrance, and credit by examination. The digest also briefly describes methods of implementing a flexible pacing program, the teacher changes needed to promote flexible pacing, the benefits of flexible pacing, and the reactions of students to flexible pacing programs. A list of 11 bibliographic resources and one organizational resource concludes the digest. (JDD)

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ERIC Digest

1989

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ABLE LEARNERS THROUGH FLEXIBLE PACING

This digest is based on information presented in *Flexible Pacing for Able Learners* (1988) by Neil Daniel and June Cox. This CEC-ERIC book includes descriptions and anecdotal information from 32 successful programs in 18 states. Highlights and case studies provide a composite picture of how flexible pacing is managed and how it works.

What Is Flexible Pacing?

Flexible pacing includes any program in which students are taught material that is appropriately challenging for their ability and allows them to move forward in the curriculum as they master content and skills. For able or gifted learners, flexible pacing generally means some form of acceleration, accomplished by moving the student up to advanced content or by moving advanced content down to the student. The rate of progress can be varied in either direction. With flexible pacing *all* students can progress through school at a pace that provides a steady challenge without crippling frustration or unreasonable pressure.

Methods to Achieve Flexible Pacing

In practice, flexible pacing can be achieved by a variety of methods:

- *Continuous progress.* Students receive appropriate instruction daily and move ahead as they master content and skills. The purest form of flexible pacing, *continuous progress* breaks the age-in-grade lockstep.
- *Compacted course.* Two or more courses, usually scheduled for a semester each, are compacted into an abbreviated time.
- *Advanced level course.* Students are enrolled in courses normally taught at a higher grade level.
- *Grade skipping.* Students move ahead 1 or more years, skipping levels in the normal sequence of promotion.
- *Early entrance.* Students enter elementary school, middle school, high school, or college earlier than the age usually prescribed.
- *Concurrent or dual enrollment.* Students at any grade level take classes in two school levels. For example, elementary school students take some classes at junior high; junior high students take some high school classes; high school students enroll for some courses at a college or university.
- *Credit by examination.* Students enter an advanced-level course or receive credit upon satisfactory completion of a comprehensive examination or upon certification of mastery. The best known examples are the College Board's advanced placement and college-level examination programs.

How Can Schools or Districts Begin to Implement a Flexible Pacing Program?

Flexible pacing will not occur systematically or to any significant extent unless the school or district has a policy that strongly encourages the practice and provides the necessary inservice support and planning time for teachers. It is often best to introduce the program gradually, with a carefully targeted student population. Some districts have selected a single subject area, often mathematics, as a starting place. Other school districts have successfully introduced continuous progress programs for students of all abilities at selected school sites. This approach works best when the principal and teachers choose to work in that setting.

Flexible pacing entails not only flexible instruction but also flexible management systems. Today, in many schools, computerized storage of records and schedules makes flexible pacing options easier to use, whereas the recordkeeping alone would have been overwhelming just a few years ago. Attention to individual needs for every student or selected groups of students can be developed piece by piece. Planners should start wherever appropriate: with a single subject, a single set of students, or a single school.

Teacher Changes Needed to Promote Flexible Pacing

Allowing students to move through the school curriculum at their own pace requires a special commitment from every teacher. First, the teacher must agree that the best way to serve students is to allow them to progress in key subject areas as they master content and skills. The teacher must recognize that as a consequence students will be placed for instruction with other students at the same achievement level, not necessarily with those of the same age.

A shift to flexible pacing normally requires training or retraining in teaching methods and classroom management that support some form of continuous progress. Inservice instruction may include conferences and workshops on methods of grouping, team teaching, curriculum sequencing, and a variety of topics specific to the subject of pacing. Teachers may also need training in more advanced or broader content within specialty areas. At the secondary level, summer institutes that prepare teachers for the College Board's advanced placement courses or the International Baccalaureate are well established. These cooperative programs contribute by helping teachers address the needs of advanced high school students undertaking college-level coursework on their high school campuses.

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What Are the Benefits of Flexible Pacing?

The educational benefit of flexible pacing is individualization of instruction and learning to a higher degree than is possible when students all move in lockstep. Students have found curriculum more challenging and less repetitious. Arranging school-wide scheduling in blocks (e.g., mathematics from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., reading and language from 10:00 to 11:00) permits an easy flow in which all students are studying the same subject at the same time but at different levels. Once grade labels are removed from achievement levels and dissociated from chronological age, students of all abilities appear to thrive.

The desired outcome of sound teaching and learning, whatever the pace, is mastery of concepts and skills. In a school with continuous progress, students can move ahead naturally as they are ready. They are not forced to choose between remaining in grade level, where they may be bored, or skipping ahead, where they may miss learning critical skills or information.

How Are People Reacting to Flexible Pacing Programs?

Typically, teachers, administrators, and parents of children in schools with flexible pacing are excited by the progress of their children. Although flexible pacing is too new to have established a strong database in research, most schools using it have found that it allows highly able learners to move ahead rapidly in all aspects of learning and skill development.

One survey of students in the Las Cruces Public Schools (Daniel & Cox, 1988) showed that students welcomed the opportunity for early entry into a more complex curriculum. They viewed their years in accelerated classes as productive and challenging. All of the 37 students in the program said that if they had the choice to make over again, they would still choose the accelerated curriculum. For each of them, the advantages far outweighed any disadvantages.

Flexible Pacing for Able Learners is available from The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091.

RESOURCES

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The major agency concerned with flexible pacing for able or gifted learners is

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